



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE ENGLISH JOURNAL

VOLUME V

MARCH 1916

NUMBER 3

CO-OPERATION IN ENGLISH

THOMAS H. BRIGGS
Teachers College, Columbia University

"Co-operation in English," protested a wielder of the blue pencil, "always means only more operation by the teachers of English." And allowing for the emphasis of overstatement, I could not make any general denial. But why should this, to any large degree, be true? The present generation of high-school teachers, having had a training in composition not unlike that offered today, at least know something of what English teachers attempt to secure by their instruction, and in consequence they should be respectful and sympathetically helpful. But, on the contrary, one hears a widespread complaint of their negligence. All of this negligence cannot be explained away by the dangerous charge of incompetence or by reference to crowded programs and the frailties of human nature. It can reasonably be explained, however, by the fact that no teachers can secure hearty co-operation from their fellow-workers unless there are manifest reciprocal advantages. Whatever oral professions of sympathy are made, pragmatically teachers of other subjects do not believe that many of the demands of English are just and worthy of the time and effort necessary to meet them satisfactorily. Behind the failure to co-operate there lies against the demands of English teachers a resentment that crystallizes, as best I can interpret it, into four charges: (1) The demands of English are not definite. (2) They

are not reasonable. (3) They are not sufficiently differentiated in terms of other subjects of study and of individual teachers. (4) They are not supported by examples of convincing co-operation by English teachers within their own work. These charges are not likely to be admitted generally, but at least they should be considered with care so that in future plans for co-operation they will be neither repeated nor believed.

The charge that the demands of English are not definite is in many cases unquestionably justified, as for example in a circular that lies on my desk. Addressed to the high-school corps of a large city, it states in general terms the necessity for every teacher's being a teacher of English, and ends with the statement, "The teacher [of every subject in our high schools] should demand respectable oral English." The advice is accepted, let us suppose; and the teachers go to their classrooms with the intention of demanding "respectable oral English." What do they actually do? For a few days each one pesters his pupils concerning such errors as he himself is conscious of not committing—errors that are more likely than not petty and of little importance in destroying effective recitations. Lacking the support of other teachers in attacking those particular errors, and having work that he thinks is of real and immediate importance, he gradually abandons the crusade. The pupils, in their turn, are annoyed or amused, as the case may be, by the sudden fusillades of birdshot from different quarters; but the attacks are too varied and too brief to result in any lasting good or even, it may be, in any real "conviction of sin." And so the campaign ends in ineffectiveness and discouragement.

Contrast with such an indefinite demand the definiteness that is found in two different programs. In one the English department issues periodic circulars stating just what each class has been taught and what its members may and should be held for. "During the past month," one circular might read (I have no copy by me), "the Freshmen have been taught to begin each paragraph of explanation, whether oral or written, with a clear-cut topic sentence." Another: "The Juniors have had much drill recently in outlining long themes. They may be expected to do this fairly well

in preparation for their own speaking or writing and very satisfactorily in the analysis and summarizing of well-written passages in their textbooks and supplementary readings." In the other program, the English department asks all the teachers of the school to work together during a certain period to eradicate some specific error or to build up some specific virtue. This being measurably accomplished, another end is proposed for co-operative work. Each program has the merit of definiteness; each is therefore likely to secure some response from even the most unsympathetic teacher in other departments.

No sympathetic co-operation is likely to be secured if teachers believe true the second charge, that the demands of the English department are not reasonable. The first specification of this charge is that many English teachers are too much concerned with detail and too little with the larger constructive elements of composition. To everyone but a theme-reader, definiteness is of more importance than indentation, and pertinency than punctuation. So long as teachers of other subjects are asked to worry over details of form which they do not consider highly significant, details about which they do not concern themselves, it may be, in their own lives—however much the purist thinks they should do so—co-operation is doomed. Every teacher should adopt as his own Professor Charles Sears Baldwin's ideal, to be a "promoter rather than a proofreader." This suggests the second specification of the charge of unreasonableness, namely, that relatively too little of the English work is constructive. It is felt by many that English teachers give to pupils an indelible impression that criticism means a hostile scrutiny of details, whereas the duties of the school and the later inevitable duties of life will demand of them positive merits—the manifestations in their compositions of such qualities as sincerity, definiteness, unity, coherence, variety, and the like. I myself have an ingrained horror of violating many detailed rules of diction or of grammar, but sometimes I am heretical enough to wish that I had an equally ardent desire and the corresponding ability to master my subject, to seek the truth consistently in discussion, and to organize such thoughts as I have so that any intelligent hearer may perceive each one, fully understand it, and

comprehend how in relation to the others it contributes to a worthy end. If English teachers will from time to time present definitely a constructive program of details that are convincingly and immediately useful and then show other teachers how each detail as taught in the English department can make for more effective recitations and papers in other classes, a greater degree of hearty co-operation is assured.

A last point under this charge concerns the demand often made that grades in subjects other than English be reduced because of errors in spelling, capitalization, and the like. Both teachers and pupils resent this demand as unfair and the little gain to English is more than offset by a resultant hostile attitude toward the whole subject. There is a certain grim humor in a situation that demands subtraction for the annoying gnats of detail while overlooking the camels destructive of the larger qualities essential for effective expression. The plan of giving in each subject a separate grade for expression is in every way more just and satisfactory. There would, I am sure, be much sympathy for a demand that grades for English composition courses be only tentative and that they be finally confirmed only after oral and written composition in other classes has proved that theory has passed over into habit.

The criticism that English does not sufficiently differentiate its demands on the several subjects and teachers of the high school is seldom definitely formulated, but in fragments it is quite generally, even if tacitly, held. From a teacher who has a fine feeling for words can be had a co-operation in developing diction that will be impossible by any means whatever from another teacher whose vocabulary is crude but sufficient to his own limited needs; from this latter teacher, on the other hand, may be had the best possible co-operation in developing directness and simplicity of expression. From the departments of foreign language, English may reasonably expect co-operation in enlarging vocabulary, in inculcating an interest in words—their origin and their subtle shades of meaning—in improving spelling, in effecting an appreciation of the possibilities of sentence forms, and the like; from history and some forms of science it may expect co-operation in securing in the larger units of composition definiteness and completeness of statement; and

from mathematics it may expect co-operation in emphasizing exactness and clarity of expression, with the necessary appreciation of the value of conjunctions. But if English demands of each subject co-operation to secure ends which that subject does not for itself emphasize, failure is all but inevitable. It is both possible and wise from time to time to show teachers of other subjects that often when they complain of the poor English of their pupils the fault lies in an inadequate conception of the subject-matter or in muddled thinking; and comprehension of this not infrequent situation should prove both helpful to the other subjects and a relief to English. When English repeatedly makes obvious its constant ancillary function, it may expect that other teachers will at least attempt to keep alive, to make respected, and to develop as habit in pupils what it has laboriously presented in its classes.

Finally, it is charged that English does not practice its own precepts—that is, it does not adequately co-operate with itself. It is a matter of common knowledge that teachers in secondary schools frequently know little or nothing definitely of what the elementary-school teachers have attempted to do and that very generally they fail to base the higher work on the lower. It is no excuse to report that the children have been inadequately taught, that teachers of other secondary-school subjects are also relatively ignorant of the detailed work of the lower school, or, what is manifestly true, that the college teacher himself frequently fails to understand or to use what the secondary school has tried to teach. The present common practice of recalling the work in lower grades only to blame it is most unfortunate. Elementary or secondary teachers in conference should decide what experience has shown that children in different stages of progress can learn, and then both the children and their teachers should be held responsible for these facts and skills in the upper grades.

As an instance of the wasteful repetition I may cite the general practice concerning the form of business or social letters. This is taught early in the elementary school, usually not later than the fourth grade; it is repeated in every high-school textbook, and not infrequently in manuals prepared for college use. Why? Chiefly because teachers have not, with a knowledge of what has been

taught, demanded of the children that they apply their knowledge, or else because they have not made it so uncomfortable for the teachers in lower grades by a definite and convincing presentation of the facts to them in conference or to the administrative offices of the school that each will do his duty in relation to the whole good of the child. When a teacher patiently repeats in theme reading the correction of the same error, after the pupil clearly understands and recognizes it as an error and appreciates the need of its eradication, he is failing so thoroughly to co-operate with himself that he has narrow ground for complaint of others. Of course, so long as there are in our course of study in English elements that have no application, as a dozen of the major topics in grammar, and so long as elements are taught without immediate application to secure some result that seems to the pupil worth while, there is little possibility of effective co-operation even within the field of English itself.

Another phase of this final criticism concerns the very inadequate grading of pupils according to their ability in composition. Every published study of this ability has shown a distribution overlapping not only the classes immediately preceding and following, but in some instances spreading over several years in each direction. In Butte and Salt Lake City, for example, there were found as low as the fourth grade children who wrote better than 50 per cent of those in the eighth grade; and in the Sophomore class of one of our reputable colleges, a young man was found whose best writing was classed by judges with that expected in an upper grade of the elementary school. There is no doubt that in the great majority of our schools there is an overlapping of ability from grade to grade that means uneven progress by the children. One cause of such a situation is, of course, the difference in intellectual ability and industry possessed by a group of pupils, and a second is the difference in linguistic environment. One of our most wasteful proceedings in education is that of administering on the basis of age or ability in arithmetic, or some such subject, the same details of language to all pupils regardless of their attainments and possibilities. In the elementary grades such a procedure may be necessitated by the organization of the school; but

in the Junior or Senior high school departmental teaching and the accepted ideal of homogeneous grouping should make it possible to classify each pupil in English more nearly where his relative ability warrants. It is no violation of the principles of democracy to differentiate courses of study if thereby chances of progress are made equal. Co-operation within the field of English would demand, then, the classification of each pupil, on the basis of definitely recognized standards, where he could receive instruction best suited to his particular needs. On such a basis some would undoubtedly at once receive a credit of one, two, or even three years' work in composition, while others would be set back into existing or special classes that might defer graduation one or more years—unless the administrative authorities waived, as they probably would and should do, the requirement of the same standard of self-expression for all students.

These criticisms are the ones which, as one now interested in the general field of education, I gather from discussions with administrators and teachers of subjects other than English. They may not be soundly based or they may not be generally true; the fact remains, however, that they are made and are believed by the people on whom the success of plans for co-operation is dependent. It is necessary, then, that English teachers consider each criticism with care and without any idea of personal defense, so that they may by any means whatever make such criticism in the future impossible or, at least, manifestly untrue. English teachers would just as well accept the fact—for fact it is—that in the various excellent plans proposed for co-operation most of the work will fall on their shoulders. Those who are wise will, after a survey of the situation as a whole, make their demands definite and reasonable and then seek from their colleagues such help as each one is most competent and most willing to give.